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ON HANDLING SUPPLEMENTARY READING. I

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Some three centuries ago the wise Lord Verulam recorded a sentence or so to the effect that different books deserve different kinds of reading, and despite frequent quotation his words are still fresh and vital. At present they are finding a very practical application in the familiar division of "books for careful study" and those "for general reading." Gradually we teachers of English are coming to recognize more and more fully that we must train our students not only to read carefully and attentively, but also to read widely.

In the thoughtfully planned course in English literature there will be a place for both intensive and extensive work, each receiving a fitting emphasis and each contributing its share toward the student's development. Any defense of intensive work in literature is perhaps superfluous, for gradually the conviction has been growing that many phases of the study of English letters may afford as valuable a training in the acquirement of a definite body of subject-matter as can be gained from any other part of the curriculum. A clear-cut knowledge of certain facts of English literary history is essential to any right apprehension of our literature; and frequently an exact acquaintance with particular details of an author's life is necessary for an understanding of his writings. Again, the student who really masters his literature must acquire that sort of intimacy which enables him to identify and at times to quote definite passages; he must gain an accurate knowledge of words and allusions, not that such training is highly valuable in itself, any more than is the mastery of the Latin vocabularies in a *Gradatim*, but because these are essential auxiliaries for any adequate study of English literature; he must further understand that many species of literature, especially the various forms of poetry, are subject to certain laws and principles which he must

master thoroughly. Ruskin's analyses of various passages in literature may have carried a good method to the point of fancifulness and possibly of whim; they have, however, done much good in emphasizing the value of the close, careful, and at times literal study of great masterpieces and in bringing home a realization of the importance of a definite and abiding knowledge of the best things that great men have thought and said. All too often teachers of English have allowed students to pass on from year to year remembering "a mass of things, but none of them distinctly." In this connection I recall asking a boy about his previous year's work, which he told me had included a careful study of Addison. All that he could recollect from this study was that Addison lived about the time of Columbus, perhaps a little earlier, and that the text used in class had been bound in red. I am not prepared to say that this boy had gained nothing from the time spent on the *Spectator* papers, even if the two statements just quoted constitute the clarified residuum of the work; but I am convinced that he had quite missed the training that might have come from making his own a concrete body of facts and from relating these facts with others both of literary history and of his own life.

But while we realize the importance of studying thoroughly certain masterpieces and of making them permanently one's own, we must recognize that the wise teacher will also strive to acquaint his pupils with as much good literature as the time at his disposal may permit, and will emphasize both the intensive and the extensive reading of these better things. He will perceive that it is at once his duty and his privilege to help his students cultivate right habits of reading, which in later years may aid them in "tearing the heart from a book." At times teachers have made the mistake of examining every masterpiece in such minute detail that students have failed to grasp the significance of the book as a whole—they haven't been able to see the forest for the trees. The framers of the International Sunday School Lessons have, I believe, fallen into a similar error. Year after year they have gone along, assigning for each week's study some ten or twenty verses of Scripture and have failed, apparently, to realize that at a certain stage of development boys and girls are ready for a much more comprehensive view, such

as might be gained by taking at a single lesson either several chapters or even a whole book of the Bible.

Fortunately we can recognize among present-day teachers of English a strongly marked conviction of the need of more extensive reading and a realization of the value of larger reading lists and of better methods of directing such work. Any wide and satisfactory reading list, I am persuaded, must be the result of the joint labors of a large number of teachers, contributing from their experiences under widely varying conditions, rather than the dicta of any one instructor measuring his five or twenty-five feet of best books for high-school pupils. Consequently such a list as that just prepared by the committee of the National Council will doubtless prove of very distinct value to every teacher of our subject. It is my purpose in this paper rather to suggest certain practical methods of handling this matter, and to indicate some of the various devices that have proved effective in aiding students to acquire a more extensive acquaintance with books under the supervision and direction of the teacher of literature.

A dozen questions at once suggest themselves as to the number of books that may be assigned each year, their choice and method of assignment, ways of securing the necessary supplies of books, and means of interesting pupils in the work. In beginning it must be confessed that here, as elsewhere in teaching, there is no one royal way. School conditions vary so greatly in different communities that methods succeeding admirably in one place may fail utterly in another. Some schools are composed largely of students from the homes of the better educated, where from their earliest years many boys and girls have browsed in good libraries; while other schools, especially those in the larger cities, include a large percentage of pupils from foreign homes, where better books are practically unknown. Furthermore, in certain communities the boys and girls have easy access to a wide range of books; while in others the pupils and the schools are limited in means and are either unable or unwilling to add largely to their scant store.

Such, at the outset, are some of the problems confronting us, and they are very practical ones indeed to the hundreds of teachers who are every day trying to solve them. While no one method of

providing an adequate supply of books may be offered, certain general suggestions may, perhaps, be in order. First of all, the instructor must to the best of his ability bring home to the pupils and to the school authorities the importance of this supplementary or extensive reading; and, whenever occasion offers, he must emphasize the fact that such work can be made of immense value to the pupil in forming right habits of reading. In this matter, as in many other things educational, the teacher must gain the active interest of those with whom he is working. In many communities, especially the smaller ones, much may be done toward securing the necessary books through establishing a more active co-operation between parents and teachers; in other places not a little may be accomplished through the help of the town librarian; or through enlisting the assistance of the principal and the board of education in building up the school library, especially through the buying of duplicates. Much may be effected by encouraging the individual student to start collecting a library for himself; and in these days of many cheap editions of standard books the teacher may with justice demand that pupils buy a few volumes for this work, just as they purchase other texts. If the various students procure different books, they may, on occasion, borrow and loan among themselves.

The amount of extensive reading assigned each year will vary not only with the nature of the community and the ease of access to books but also with the advancement of the classes, their aptitude for reading, the amount of school work required of the pupils and the teacher, and, personally, I believe, with the season of the year. As a rule, very naturally, the student who has been trained for a year or two in this systematic reading of better books is far more capable of completing longer and more difficult assignments than he might reasonably have been expected to master when he was finding himself in the earlier years of his high-school life. Moreover, for various reasons, or apparently at times for no reason at all, classes coming up from practically the same elementary training differ widely both in their preparation and in their avidity and aptitude for work. Again, schools vary in the amount of work required of pupils, some of the especially ambitious demanding

very much more than is asked in others; and while it is paradoxically true of most of our species that the busier we are the more we have time to undertake, the English instructor must see that this extensive reading does not consume an undue proportion of the student's energies. Such a caution is sometimes necessary, for many pupils find this work so interesting that occasionally they are tempted to pursue it at the expense of their other studies, thus provoking the teachers of those branches to demand protection for their special industries. Furthermore, it happens now and then that English instructors find these reports on supplementary reading something of a burden, and are therefore tempted at times to slight it in favor of the regular assignment of a limited number of pages or chapters upon which all the students of the class are expected to make certain definite preparation. That the management of the supplementary reading makes large demands upon the time and ingenuity of the teacher must, of course, be granted; but in this very fact lies a challenge and an opportunity. Most of us are too timid in attempting innovations and are too prone to worship the pedagogical gods of our fathers. Teachers of English and editors of English classics have often fallen lamentably short of their high possibilities because they have copied all too servilely the intensive methods of the instructors in Latin and Greek and have been fearful of attempting to introduce their students to a large number of books. If this widening of the field brings to the teacher of English increased responsibility, it also brings him such increased opportunities that, if necessary, he is thoroughly justified in giving to the direction and guidance of this more extensive reading a part of the time and strength now spent upon the intensive study. Just what part of their time and energy teachers should give to this guidance of their students' reading cannot, of course, be reduced to any set proportions; but in most cases there can be little doubt that such work should receive greater attention than it does at present. Finally, the amount and difficulty of this reading may well vary with the season of the year. The wise teacher will plan his work so that the longer and more difficult books will be read in the autumn, after the students have become settled in their year's work and are still fresh, or during the winter,

when the rougher weather and the long evenings invite them to stay indoors; and he will leave some of the lighter and easier volumes for that season of the year when even Chaucer was tempted to say farewell to his "boke and his devocion."

In making up a list for supplementary reading the teacher is at once confronted by the question of whether he shall include nothing but the best books, assuming that students are interested in these and wish to know more of them; or shall he make allowances for their undeveloped or misdirected tastes and attempt gradually to attract them to better things? Something is to be gained, doubtless, by assuming that people are really better than they seem and by treating them accordingly. Furthermore, many students have been reading inferior books because these were more accessible, or because no one had ever attempted to direct them to the reading of good literature. I have been interested in watching high-school boys, whose previous reading had been thoroughly aimless and not of the best, simply devour some of the standard novels, glorying in these new worlds which had swung into their ken, and manifesting that avidity and enthusiasm with which adolescence so frequently welcomes each new kind of knowledge and experience. On the other hand, however, such cases are the exception rather than the rule; and the teacher must recognize that in most instances the best results are to be gained by taking these untrained or badly trained pupils just where they are, studying their crude likes and dislikes, trying to discover such preferences as mark their particular stages of development, and using these as a point of departure. In endeavoring to learn the status of taste in an entering class the instructor may well have recourse to some written work on such topics as "The books I like the best," "My favorite author," "Some character in literature I should like to meet." These themes afford invaluable material for the thoughtful teacher in planning his supplementary reading for the year. He may gain further help by asking the members of the class to hand in a list of books they wish to read.

To this list of desirable books suggested by the particular needs or wishes of the students the teacher will add various classics which should form a part of the equipment of every well-educated man

and woman, and to which allusion is constantly being made, such as certain parts of the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Gulliver's Travels*, the great ancient epics, and the *Arabian Nights*. No harm will be done by including occasionally a volume beyond the students and letting them wrestle with it, for they often take such a book as a challenge and surprise one by what they have gained from its perusal. The teacher's list will also contain books that may help supplement and enrich the work in the classics chosen for careful discussion. The best reward to be gained from the study of a masterpiece comes when the students wish to know more of an author they have been discussing and ask to be allowed to read some of his other writings. It would be hard to overestimate the value of the training which comes to the pupil from thus growing interested in some particular subject, from thus starting from some book and branching out. Especially is this true in the case of the Shakspearean plays, for I have known many students thus to acquire a lasting appreciation of the great master. What a delight it is to meet such pupils after coming in contact with dozens of others whose knowledge of the Elizabethan dramatist is confined to the three plays usually studied in class, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Macbeth*! This assignment of additional books by authors previously discussed in class is particularly valuable in affording pupils an opportunity to confirm or to extend the impressions gained from their previous study. From their intensive work they have acquired, to borrow the phraseology of the psychologist, a certain apperception mass which welcomes this later reading, assimilates it readily, and is thereby greatly enriched.

Almost as valuable for our lists as this further reading in any particular author are such books as help the pupil to a clearer understanding either of a particular age or of a type of literature he has been studying. For example, the boy who through his study of the *De Coverley Papers* has grown interested in that fascinating age of immense periwigs and patches, of hoops and high red heels, of coffee-houses and sedan chairs, will welcome such books as *Henry Esmond*, Dobson's delightful verse and his fascinating life of Sir Richard Steele, or Ashton's *Social England in the Reign of Queen Anne*; or if he has followed the ancient heroes through

their battles on the wind-swept plains of Troy, he may be curious to learn of the further adventures of the crafty and much-enduring Odysseus or of the *pious Aeneas*.

Again, the list will include many works of biography and history, such as may be well told and interesting in themselves or may help supplement the students' work in other courses. America may well be proud of its splendid biographies and memoirs of distinguished men, of Johnson and of Stonewall Jackson, of Grant and of Sheridan, the perusal of whose deeds has fascinated more than one boy who thought that he cared nothing for reading. Furthermore, there will be a place for some of the magnificent histories written either by our own countrymen or by our cousins across the water, for the vigorous and attractive lectures of such scientists as Huxley, and for the books by those authors who are telling us of out-door life, either as we may see it in our own neighborhoods, or as we may be interested in it through pictures and tales of the blazed trail.

How much of modern fiction shall be included in our list is not an easy question to answer. As we watch the dozens of thumb-marked, germ-laden copies of the current "six best sellers" passing over the loan desks of our public libraries, we are sometimes tempted to wonder whether these institutions are an unmixed blessing, and whether such books, these intellectual ice cream sodas, are not ruining the mental digestion of thousands of readers. On the other hand, however, we must remember that coming generations will prize as literature some of the books now pouring from the press, and that the better contemporary critics have always manifested a much greater ability than is usually acknowledged in recognizing the merits of a book that is genuinely worth while. We must also bear in mind the fact that after our pupils have left our care most of them will read more or less of this lighter contemporary fiction.

[To be concluded]